



Because of Bethlehem Leader Guide Session 4: Every Heart a Manger

Video: Every Heart a Manger (16 minutes)

Play the video segment for session 4. As you watch, use outline provided to follow along or to take additional notes on anything that stands out to you.

Notes:

The story of Christmas is the story of God's relentless love for us. We might question his actions, decisions, or declarations. But because of Bethlehem, we can never question his unquenchable affection for us.

If he is willing to be born in a barnyard, expect him to be at work anywhere. No place is too common. No person is too hardened. No distance is too far. There is no limit to his love.

Jesus' time on earth would be a search-and-rescue mission.

In the manger God loves you and through the cross he saves you. But has he taken you to his home? Not yet. He has work for you to do. He wants the world to see what God can do with his purchased possessions.

God prunes us.

God "*decorates*" us. He festoons us with the fruit of the Spirit. He crowns us. He sends his angels to protect us and his Word as a star to guide us.

God *surround us with his grace*. We become the distribution point of God's gifts.

God *places us*. "You made my whole being; you formed me in my mother's body. I praise you because you made me in an amazing and wonderful way. What you have done is wonderful... All the days planned for me were written in your book before I was one day old." (Psalms 139:13-14, 16 NCV)

Christmas invites us to believe the wildest of promises: God became one of us so we could become one with him.

Listen as God whispers, "No mess turns me back; no smell turns me off. I live in a life like yours." Every heart can be a manger. Every day can be a Christmas.

Discussion Questions:

- What part of the teaching had the most impact on you?

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Christmas Tree Traditions

- Max said, “from childhood through adulthood, the Christmas tree is a rock that Christmas memories are built on.” Use two or more of the following questions as prompts to describe your childhood Christmas tree traditions.
 - Did your family usually have a Christmas tree every year or, like the story Max told, were there year you went without a tree?
 - Did your family put up a fresh tree or an artificial tree? If a fresh tree, where did you get it? What did you look for in the tree you picked – a certain variety of tree, size, shape, fragrance, ect.?
 - What color was your tree? Green, white, silver, ect.?
 - How big was your tree? Too big for the room it was in, just about right, or small enough to sit on a table?
 - What were your traditions around decorating the tree?
 - What crowned your tree? A star, angel, other ornament, ect.?
 - When did you typically put up and take down your tree each year?
- Now consider some of the Christmas tree traditions and memories from your adult years.
 - In what ways, if any, have your traditions changed since you were a child?
 - What is your favorite part of having a Christmas tree each year? Share any stories that come to mind.
- “The story of Christmas is the story of God’s relentless love for us,” Max said. “we might question his actions, decisions, or declarations. But because of Bethlehem, we can never question his unquenchable affection for us.”
 - As you reflect on your relationship with God, when would you say you have been most aware and most certain of God’s love for you?
 - Love is always a gift, and when it is offered we have the option to decline it or to accept it. To receive love when it is offered requires vulnerability – we have to *let* ourselves be loved. On the occasion when you have been most certain of God’s love, how, specific, did you *let* God love you? (if you find it helpful, you might consider the ways in which young children naturally let themselves be loved.)
 - Even though God’s love is unceasing, we sometimes go through seasons when we either doubt it or struggle to let God love us. Perhaps our life resembles a stable – crude in spots, smelly in other – and we doubt God could love us in that condition, or we shrink back from letting him love us. What, if anything, has led you to doubt God’s love for you? Or, when do you tend to shrink back from letting God love you?

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- Perhaps no image better symbolizes the love story of Christmas than a babe in the manger. Here is what we know about Jesus' first resting place on earth:

She gave birth to her firstborn son. She wrapped him snugly in strips of cloth and laid him in a manger, because there was no lodging available for them.

(Luke 2:7 NLT)

There was nothing extraordinary about that manger; it was a humble feeding trough. It became the cradle for a king because it was available and because God chose it. And it wasn't a random choice. Throughout the Christmas story God consistently chose the small, lowly, and the outcast.

God *chose Bethlehem*. God could have chosen a more prominent and distinguished city such as Jerusalem. Instead, he chose the little town of Bethlehem: "But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, through you are small among clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel" (Micah 5:2)

God *chose Mary*. God could have chosen the daughter of a king or the wife of an esteemed rabbi to be the mother of the Messiah. Instead, he chose an unknown and ordinary young woman who described herself as a "lowly servant girl" (Luke 1:48 NLT)

God *chose the shepherds and the magi*, God could have chosen to announce the Messiah's birth first to priests and rulers. Instead, he chooses outcasts and outsiders (see Matthew 2:1-2; Luke 2:9-11). Shepherds were at the bottom of the social ladder in Palestinian life and the magi were both Gentiles and foreigners.

- The manger was humble, Bethlehem was small, Mary was lowly, the shepherds were outcasts, and the magi were outsiders. Two thousand years later, our familiarity with the Christmas Story perhaps make it difficult to grasp what radically unexpected choices there really were. To get a better understanding, consider what the contemporary equivalents of these choices might be.

Bethlehem manger: In your community, what is the smallest, humblest, most unexpected place a royal baby might be born?

Mary: Who is the most unknown, ordinary, or lowly servant of a young woman you can imagine giving birth to a royal baby?

Shepherds and Magi: Who are the outcast and outsiders that might be the first to hear God's royal birth announcements?

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- God's choices were not only unexpected; they were also subversive. A subversive person engages in a systematic attempt to overthrow an established order by working secretly from within it. In what ways do you recognize the subversive nature of God's choices? How would you describe the "established order" God was working to overthrow?
- Although the characters in the Christmas story may or may not have known it at the time, God's unexpected and subversive choices were expressions of his limitless love. In what ways does this truth – that God's love is sometimes expressed in unexpected or subversive ways – challenge you? In what ways does it encourage you?
- Max said, "In the manger God loves you, and through the cross he saves you. But has he taken you to his home? Not yet. He has work for you to do. He wants the world to see what God can do with his purchased possessions." Using the image of a Christmas tree, Max explained how God *prunes us*, *decorates us*, *surrounds us with grace*, and then *places us* to make a difference in the world. As you consider this season of your life, which aspect of this process do you identify with most? Place a check mark next to the statement that best describes your response.
 - ***I am being pruned.*** God is working on my character, helping me to address self-defeating habits of thought and behavior (see John 15:1-2).
 - ***I am being decorated.*** God is challenging me and helping me to grow in the fruits of the Spirit – love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (see Galatians 5:22-23).
 - ***I am being surrounded with grace.*** God is helping me to grow in grace. I am learning to rely on grace more and more – not just when I need forgiveness but for every moment throughout the day. This is what enables me to increasingly give gifts of grace to others (see 1 Peter 4:10; 2 Peter 3:18).
 - ***I am being placed.*** God knows me and has a purpose for me right where I am. He is helping me to love people and make a difference in the world throughout my everyday life (see Psalm 139:13-14, 16).
- Which statement do you identify with most? Share the reasons for your response.
- If it's true that God "wants the world to see what he can do with his purchased possession," what might God want the world to see in you in this pruning/decorating/gracing/placing season of your life? Use the following sentence starter: *Through me, God wants the world to see that he can ...*

Walking Together Through Advent

Take a few moments to discuss what you've learned and experience together throughout the *Because of Bethlehem* study.

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- In session 1, you consider how Advent is primarily a season of preparation rather than celebration. In what ways, if any, has this perspective change your experience of Advent or helped you to prepare spiritually for Christmas?
- Overall, how would you describe your experience of any weekly Advent practices? To what degree, if any did they help you make room for Christ in your life and in your heart?
- What would you say is the most important thing you learned or experienced through your study and sharing together?
- How have you recognized God's work among you as a group?